

Promising Practices Case Study: Cultural Brokers/Cultural Volunteers (Halton District School Board (HDSB), Halton)

The Initiative

To meet the language requirements of its students and families, Halton District School Board (HDSB) uses several innovative methods such as the Youth Settlement Program, language interpreters, Language Line, and LINK crew (a 'buddy' system where older students help younger students transition from grade 8 to grade 9). This case study profiles the Cultural Brokers/Cultural Volunteers model, successfully used by HDSB to meet the language needs of its younger students.

In most community settings, language interpretation tends to take place between adults, and in education settings, between parents and teachers. When dealing with children who have limited English language proficiency, HDSB has found that flexibility and innovation are required. These children need access to someone with whom they can communicate in their first language who can facilitate communication of issues to and from the teacher, help with language and other educational assessments, and who can provide comfort when children talk about things they find stressful. HDSB has found that not being able to fully meet children's language needs has sometimes led to misdiagnosing them as 'problem children' and to not fully accessing the supports available to them through 'ESL' programs. In extreme cases, this has led to sending a child home due to 'English' problems. In response, HDSB developed and uses *Cultural Brokers* and *Cultural Volunteers* as a way of meeting the language and cultural needs of their students.

Cultural Brokers are professional interpreters who are hired by the school to help new and continuing students with limited English proficiency. They are considered to be a short-term support person, who speaks the language of the child and helps the child integrate into the school system better. In HDSB, Cultural Brokers are available for children in any grade when they display high levels of stress, anxiety, and attachment disorder at intake or in classroom, and tend to be used most frequently in Kindergarten classrooms. Cultural Brokers also help to informally assess if there are issues other than language and culture that may be impacting a child's education and behavior.

Cultural Volunteers provide cultural brokering for free. They are an invaluable resource because they provide a critical service for free. This allows the HDSB to use Cultural Volunteers when professional Cultural Brokers are not affordable, for example, in cases where a child requires long term support for severe anxiety and transition difficulties. Cultural Volunteers are also used for special situations, such as field trips, where their presence enhances students' learning significantly.

How the Model Works

Process: When a teacher notices a child facing language related difficulties at intake or in class, the teacher meets with a HDSB central office Settlement consultant to draw-up a short-term cultural brokering plan for the child and longer term integration and ESL plan, with a view to using a Cultural Broker for transitional support. Very anxious children are assigned a full day cultural brokering session to start. Generally, the child meets with the Cultural Broker 1 hour a day for 2 weeks. The child may attend school for shorter days in the beginning and gradually increase attendance as he/she gains confidence. If the child continues to display anxiety and uneasiness or requires more help the teacher meets with central office to pair the child with a Cultural Volunteer for continuing, longer-term support.

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Training: Even though Cultural Brokers are professional language interpreters who have already undergone rigorous language interpretation training, HDSB offers additional Cultural Brokering training. Training occurs 3 to 4 times a year and is 3 to 4 hours long. Training focuses on identifying attachment disorders, removing child's dependency on a broker, interpreting the school environment, defining and delineating the roles and responsibilities, and practice through case scenarios. The training is child centered which adds a different perspective to traditional language interpreting training modules.

Training for Cultural Volunteers is done by the Halton Multicultural Council (HMC), which also provides a roster of Cultural Volunteers for HDSB. Volunteers undergo volunteer training at HMC. Once a volunteer is introduced to the HDSB, they meet with the teacher and central HDSB Settlement staff to discuss the child's needs and progress from there.

Challenges

The model is not without challenges. First, the demand for cultural brokerage is larger than the supply of Cultural Brokers. This is especially true among Languages of Lesser Diffusion (e.g., uncommon languages). Further, because of funding limitations, cultural brokerage is currently not available for every student that needs it. Third, the model requires significant time and patience on the part of teachers to be effective; those with heavy workloads may not access the supports easily. Fourth, there needs to be more and sustained training available for both education staff and cultural brokers. Staff should be trained about the role of Cultural Brokers so that they are able to take advantage of this support, while Cultural Brokers should be trained on how to more effectively work with staff.

Results/Sustainability

Results: As a result of this initiative, there are fewer primary level students in distress and, generally, fewer distress calls are made to HDSB central staff. Also, in the last two years, ESL scores in the HDSB have improved significantly. Although one can't definitively link this progress to cultural brokerage, staff is confident that cultural brokerage is a major contributor to their students' success along with the other interpretation and translation and ESL initiatives that work together to support children. The model has also generated enduring partnerships between HDSB and community agencies (i.e., settlement, community agencies, interpretation services, and community members). While some aspects of this model are sustainable (this is especially true for Cultural Volunteers who work free of cost), HDSB staff believe that long-term model sustainability of the model largely depends on steady funding.

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